SIN AND THE HUMAN CONDITION
GENESIS 3:1-7
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To read the news of what's happening in the world is to sense that there is something radically wrong with man. Four news items affected me recently: one - in the Journal and Courier - told the story of a nine year old East Harlem girl, mentally retarded and crippled, who was drowned by her mother in order to prevent her from starving to death. Another - in Time Magazine - told the story of South Vietnamese children, burned, disfigured, crippled as a result of the continued massive bombing by American B-52's. Still another - in Time - revealed the effect the continuing guerilla war in Northern Ireland is having on the young. And finally - the tragedy in the midst of the Olympics: doubly tragic because it happened among a people heroically determined to erase the memory of past madness and bloodshed.

What is it? What's wrong with man? Why - in the middle of a beautiful and moving celebration, devoted to affirming universal brotherhood, does evil have to raise its ugly head? Is there some demonic force loose among us? Two chilling best sellers this year are based on the premise: The Exorcist and The Other. Is it psychological? Are many of us simply psychotic with no concept of right and wrong? Or is it simply that our animal nature keeps bursting the seams of civilization? That suggestion has always intrigued us and it might be plausible except, as Dostoevsky pointed out long ago, it is a gross insult to the animals. For man can be more fiendishly clever in his wickedness than an animal ever can be.

Or is it just ignorance? Given enough time, education, and growth can we expect human evil to disappear? That suggestion is built into the fabric of Western civilization, but its bankruptcy keeps being revealed by current events.

What's wrong with man? There is no poverty of suggested answers. But the Christian faith has always suggested that the answer is in the single and deceptively simple little word "sin."

Now sin is not a particularly popular subject any more. In fact, we rather balk at the suggestion that we are sinners. One of the prayers of confession says it very accurately: "O God, we often resent having to offer this prayer. We seldom feel like sinners... strengthen us in our struggle with pride - the sin which makes us bristle at the very word

sin." And if we aren't digging in our heels and balking at the suggestion that we are sinners, we are snickering because most of the activities once labeled as sinful turn out to be rather fun. In any case sin is not a very popular topic. Phyllis McGinley in a delightful poem entitled "Community Church" puts it this way:

"The Rev. Mr. Harcourt, folks agree,
nodding their heads in solid satisfaction
Is just the man for this community.
Tall, young, urbane, but capable of action
He pleases where he serves. He marshalls out
The younger crowd, lacks trace of clerical unction,
Cheers the Kiwianis and the Eagle Scout,
Is popular at every function.
And in the pulpit, eloquently speaks
On diners matters with both wit and clarity:
Art, Education, God, the early Greeks,
Psychiatry, St. Paul, true Christian Charity,
Vestry repairs that shortly must begin -
All things but sin. He seldom mentions sin."

Well, if that is true: if the Rev. Mr. Harcourt seldom mentions sin, it is because what the church has said about sin in the past doesn't ring true any more. Part of the problem may well be our stubborn reluctance to be called a sinner: but a more important part is simply the intrinsic awareness that if sin is a reality, it is a great deal more complex than that list of forbidden fruit touted by the church in recent history. A typical list of "Sunday School sins" goes something like this: smoking, drinking, playing cards, going to movies on Sunday, dancing, being too interested in sex. And a typical Presbyterian does them all, with perhaps a tiny smidgen of guilt left over from childhood, but with no serious intention of stopping. Unfortunately most of the people who talk about sin with any regularity, are still talking in these terms,with the result that sin is just not taken very seriously by the majority of thoughtful churchmen today. And that's too bad. Because, as I attempted to say at the outset, the problem of human evil does not go away:

the question of what is wrong with the human condition is a terribly complex question that needs our continuing and intelligent attention.

A starting point is the understanding that before sin becomes an act it is a condition. That's simple enough, and yet most thinking about sin bogs down precisely here. It's simpler to deal with behavior than the attitudes behind the behavior. To use a medical analogy, it's a whole lot simpler to take a pain reliever for a headache than to submit to the exhaustive kind of total examination that may be necessary to discover the cause of the headache. And sometimes it's necessary. If a man has a drinking problem it may be - and is necessary - to require him to stop drinking. But it is irresponsible to consider the problem solved at that point. The real difficulty remains untouched: only the immediate symptom has been elliminated. So we begin by asserting that sin is a condition - a state of being before it becomes a specific act.

And from there, I would direct your attention to the third chapter of Genesis - the Biblical definition of the human condition. My hunch is that we've not read that story very carefully and that over the years we have moved progressively further from its intent. Adam comes from the Hebrew "ad-ham" and it means "man". The Biblical writer is suggesting that it is the human story told here: and from that we can conclude that it is a serious mistake to try to conjure up in our minds an actual Adam and Eve in a real garden at a specific point in time. That's not the intent. Rather the writer is suggesting that the story is timeless - it happens in every age: in every human life.

The classic interpretation of the story is that Adam and Eve were victims of primordial pride: they wanted to be like God: they didn't want to live within the rules: their sin was arrogant rebellion against God and an elevation of self as master of creation. That's helpful. That helps us to put our finger on pride or egotism as the fundamental human problem. That helps us to see that when we put self in the center of our world we push God out with disastrous results. That helps us to see that the practical result of breaking our relationship with God is the breaking of our relationship with other men. For, shortly after things got started, Cain murdered his brother.

But I have come to see that there is more to the story than that. To be sure, Adam and Eve got into some basic trouble because they wanted to be more than what they were cre

created to be. The other side of the story, however, is that Adam and Eve were less than they were created to be. They sold out: abdicated from their responsibility, their dignity, and allowed a snake to determine who and what they would be. I think that part of the story is equally important and we will be exploring it next Sunday.

Pride - egotism - tells me that I am free to use other people for my own ends. Pride tells me that I may exploit a black man, a poor man,an employee. Pride tells me I can use another person sexually for my own immediate gratification - because I am all that matters. Pushed to its extremes pride means that my nation can do whatever it wants to do in order to preserve national honor: it means my race can enslave another race, or my club can exclude a black man, or in the case of Nazism, simply elliminate a whole race of people. Sin - as pride - is an insidious part of the human conditon that is destructive and disastrous when amplified by groups of people or cultures or nations.

Sin - as pride - frequently is cloaked in the garb of religion. It tells me that I am right and you are wrong. It supports me as I pat myself on the back for my own piety. It allows me to feel righteous for obeying the rules of my religion. It helps me to drive a wedge between myself and my brother.

Sin - as pride on a very personal level, motivates us to play games with each other rather than being open to true human dialogue. The original game, one psychiatrist suggests, is "Mine is better than yours" and we've all been playing it all our lives. It used to take the form of "My daddy is stronger than your daddy": then it became a little more subtle in the game "my bike is faster than your bike": and in full-blown adulthood "My trip was more exciting than your trip":"My children are smarter - my plans grander - my lawn greener - my crises more severe": all of them adult variations of that original game "Mine is better than yours." The result - fractured human relationships - egos that need constant support - and a deep, deep feeling of estrangement and aloneness when we are honest with ourselves.

The trouble with pride is that it is so much a part of us we can't beat it alone. Trying harder is not the answer: for we are so creative in sin that we are able to feel pride at being not proud: we are able - to climb the ladder of humility until we can look down on all our less humble brothers.

And at this point, if you are still with me, despair can set in. If we can't help ourselves, what is to become of us? If all our little sins of pride - all our little games of "Mine is better than yours" - get multiplied and become national and racial and sectarian arrogance on a grand, historical scale, is there really any reason to be hopeful about mankind?

Many would answer, "no - there is no hope." The cynic sees no reason for optimism in the human condition. St. Paul, after struggling with his inability even to do the things he knew were right, cried out "Who will deliver me?"

Well, having laid it on the line,as it were; having looked unflinchingly at human nature and having "told it like it is", Christian faith does offer a resolution - the only resolution, I believe, that makes any sense at all. It's called forgiveness, acceptance, grace.

In Jesus Christ God has summoned us to be honest with ourselves: honest to the degree of seeing how our pride affects all our relationships;honest to the degree of saying: "alright - I am at the center of my little world: but I don't want to be: I want my living henceforth, to grow out of God's centrality in my life, and my behavior to reflect his will - not my own."

In Jesus Christ, God has demonstrated with great clarity that he accepts us as we are: that we don't have to prove ourselves to him - and consequently we don't have to go on using our neighbors for our own self-enhancement. He loves us - and forgives us - and accepts us: and summons us to love, accept and forgive each other.

"Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man", Peter once said. Jesus didn't argue with that. Neither did he depart. And that's the best news of all. AMEN

Father, give us the courage to be honest with ourselves, and to give up the little games we play with you and each other. Help us in that most difficult religious act - to accept the fact that we are accepted: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN